

Style Over Substance: How Cool Is That?

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If one does a Google search on "how to be smart", it yields 254,000,000 results in 0.34 seconds, with thousands of tips on how to exercise smart choices in every aspect of life - from genomes to cars to clothes to kids to votes to money to FTP servers.

If one runs the same search on "how to be sincere", the top links the search engine comes up with, are software consultants and watches that go by the brand name Sincere, and a definition of the word in Merriam Webster's online dictionary.

It's a clear sign of the times – the world values smart people more than sincere ones. Well-dressed, well-heeled, well-spoken individuals score more brownie points socially, are more popular and more likely to be successful in whatever they set out to do - regardless of what they may be like within.

People in the public eye hire image consultants to make them 'look good', who monitor everything about the individual's public persona – the way they speak, the clothes they wear, the food they endorse, the places they are seen at, the causes they espouse.

Not just public personalities, even ordinary people are within the purview of image experts. Jo Anna Nicholson, author of five self-help books, including *Dressing Smart for Men* and *Dressing Smart for Women* has made a fortune out of telling others how to dress and act so that they make an "instant impression" on prospective employers and spouses. Her books include chapters on "Looking As If You Don't Have a Clue", "How to Look Accidentally Good" and "Looking Promotable."

Popular magazines and websites abound with pseudo-psychoanalytical articles on what one's clothes, hair, jewellery or accessories are saying about a person, and how people can carefully tailor their appearance to create maximum impact.

Contrast this with the attitude of the early Muslims. When the Muslims opened Jerusalem, the Christians refused to give the city's keys to anyone except the Caliph. So 'Umar ibn al-Khattaab, may Allaah be pleased with him, set off from Madeenah to Jerusalem. His entourage? One attendant and a mule, which they took turns to ride. It happened to be the attendant's turn to ride on the day they were to reach Jerusalem. The attendant volunteered to give up his turn because it would look "awkward in the eyes of the people" if he rode and the Chief of the Believers walked. 'Umar, may Allaah be pleased with him, refused, saying: "yakfeenaa sharaful Islaam – the honour of Islaam is enough for us."

On the way, while walking across a muddy area, 'Umar, may Allaah be pleased with him, took off his footwear, put it under his arm and raised his clothes so they wouldn't get muddy. When Abu Ubaydah, may Allaah be pleased with him, who was one of the commanders waiting for him saw this, he ran to 'Umar asking him to ride his horse while entering the city. He said they were in a land where the quality of clothes reflected the rank of people.

'Umar, may Allaah be pleased with him, replied: "I wish someone other than you had said that. Have you forgotten that we were a lowly people and it was Islaam

that made us honourable? If we seek honour from anything other than Islaam, Allaah will return us to that state of lowliness."

For proof regarding the fulfillment of this prophecy, one only has to look around: Muslims are being humiliated, subjugated and oppressed by the very system and people whose ways they seek to emulate, in preference to the Sunnah of their Prophet, sallallaahu alayhi wa sallam, and the example of those whom Allaah was pleased with.

It's true, cultivating "coolness" has more immediate pay-offs than cultivating sincerity. Wearing the latest brands and hanging out at the most-happening places is the ticket to gaining entry into the 'with-it' crowd – the people with the wittiest repartees, trendiest hairstyles and clothes, fanciest cars and gizmos - who spend a considerable amount of time and energy trying to stay abreast of the latest trends. As opposed to this 'magic circle', seen from the outside, the company of sincere people seems unglamorous, even boring.

But scratch deeper, and the truth surfaces.

People who try to fit in with a superficial world that subscribes to ever-changing fads, soon discover that the hollowness of their world finds an echo deep within. A deep-seated dissatisfaction with oneself takes a person to stylists and therapists, but make-up and makeovers can't change one's personality. They merely reinforce the belief that a person is incapable of being appreciated for themselves, they must use other people's advice instead of their own judgment to be successful, they must adopt someone else's idea of beauty to be acceptable in the eyes of others.

How cool is that?

On the other hand, people who set out on the straight and narrow, choosing substance over style, seeking to please Allaah as opposed to pleasing people, may not find their popularity ratings soar - quite the opposite, in fact. Yet, they get strength in the certainty of their belief, that their reward is with Allaah in the Hereafter.

What are the signs that a person is seeking to build an 'image' instead of developing true faith by their deeds?

In the book, *Riyaa: The Hidden Shirk*, it states:

"Linguistically riyaa comes from the root "ra'aa" which means to see, to behold, to view. The derived word 'riyaa' means "eye-service, hypocrisy, dissimulation; dissemblance." From a sharee'ah point of view, it means "to perform acts which are pleasing to Allaah, with the intention of pleasing other than Allaah."

The primary cause of riyaa is a weakness in faith (eemaan). When a person does not have strong faith in Allaah, he will prefer the admiration of people over the pleasure of Allaah."

There are three symptoms that are indicative of riyaa, and it is essential that a believer avoid all of them.

- The love of praise: A hadeeth mentions the first three people being thrown into hellfire -- the scholar (who taught for fame), the martyr (who fought for fame), and the person who gave his money in charity (so people would say he is generous). All three of these people desired the pleasure of

people over the pleasure of Allaah. The person who desires the praise of people must feel some pride in himself, for he feels himself worthy of being praised. There is a danger, therefore, of him becoming arrogant and boastful.

- Fear of criticism: No one likes to be criticised.

The dislike of criticism regarding religious practices may be divided into two categories:

The first category is that of a person who neglects a commandment of Allaah in order to avoid the criticism of his peers. However, the true believers are described in the Qur'aan as follows: "**...They do not fear the criticism of those who criticise. And this is the blessing of Allaah; He gives it to whomsoever He wishes. Verily, Allaah is Self-Sufficient, all Knowing.**" [Al-Maa`idah (5):54]

The second category is that of a person who obeys certain commandments of Islaam, not for the sake of Allaah, but because he fears people will look down upon him and criticise him if he does not do it. For example, a man may make his formal prayers in the mosque because he does not want people to criticise him for praying at home, or to think that he is not praying at all.

- Greed for people's possessions

If a person covets what other people possess - whether it is rank, money or power, then he will wish them to envy him similarly. For example, if he is jealous of a certain person's position in society, he will try by every possible means to attain the same position. Such desires lead people to spend their lives putting on a show for other people so that they will admire their rank, money, or power."

How does one go about seeking sincerity?

Imaam Ibn-al Qayyim al Jawziyyah, may Allaah have mercy on him, says: "If your soul informs you to quest for Ikhlaas, turn first towards your yearning and slaughter it with a knife [in a state] of desperation. Then turn [in a state of] asceticism upon praise and commendation... If your quest in slaughtering the yearning, and [the acquisition of] asceticism [against] praise and commendation is successful, your [journey] shall be facilitated in your [quest] for Ikhlaas."

Tameem ad-Daaree, may Allaah be pleased with him, said: the Prophet sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam, said thrice (to lay stress): "The Deen is naseehah (sincerity and sincere advice)." We said: To whom? He said: "To Allaah, His Book, His Messenger and to the leaders of the Muslims and the general people." [Saheeh Muslim]

Imaam an-Nawawee, may Allaah have mercy on him, has a lengthy commentary on this hadeeth in *Sharh Saheeh Muslim*, in which he says:

"Sincerity to Allaah means having faith in Him... avoiding disobedience to Him, to love for His sake and to hate for His sake, to keep good relations with those that obey Him and to have enmity with those that disobey Him. To fight jihaad with those who disbelieve in Him. To recognise His favours and to give thanks to Him for them. To have sincerity in all affairs. To call to everything that we have mentioned, and to encourage it. To show kindness to all the people, all those whom you are able to, in this call."

“..sincerity to the general Muslims ... is to guide them to what is beneficial for them, both in the Hereafter and this life. To keep harm away from them, to teach them that which they are ignorant of regarding the Deen... to help them by words and actions, to hide their faults and to fulfill their needs and wants; to remove that which is harmful for them and to bring that which is of benefit to them; enjoin them with good and forbid them from evil, with gentleness, sincerity and compassion for them.

Having respect for their elderly and mercy for their young. To give them good admonition, not acting deceitfully towards them. To love the good things for them, which he would love for himself. To hate the bad things for them, which he would hate for himself. To protect their wealth and reputation and encourage and advise them to take on the character of all that we have mentioned, from all the types of sincerity...”

If you skipped the last three paragraphs, I urge you to scroll up and read them slowly and carefully – they contain the prescription to our problems as an Ummah.

As Muslims, our main concern is not to score points over each other - it is to help each other gain Allaah's pleasure.

As Muslims, our job in this world is to establish the Truth -- how can we presume to do that when we fail to be honest in our innermost motives?

As Muslims, our supplication is:

Allaahumma ij' al baatinanaa khayran min dhaahirina;
wa-ija'al dhaahiranaa khayran

[O Allaah! Make the hidden aspects of our personality better than our outer persona; and make our appearance good]

How can we assume vicegerency over the Earth when we fail to be sincere slaves to our Lord; when we are concerned with outward appearances more than the state of our soul?